Podcast 2: Evaluating Information and Digital Content

Mark: Welcome to Podcast 2: Evaluating Information and Digital Content. In the first Y4Y Digital Literacy podcast, Tasha, a student, shared how she safely searched for information about her project's topic, the health effects of sugar consumption. Tasha did a great job navigating the internet safely and protecting her privacy. But how did Tasha evaluate information? What process can students follow to determine credibility? Let's check in again with Tasha to learn how she found accurate information.

Hi Tasha, welcome back!

Tasha: Hi Mark, thanks! What's today's topic?

Mark: Could you talk about how you selected information to use in your project? How did you evaluate the sites and articles for credibility?

Tasha: I started with two websites. One was a news website where I found an article warning that eating sugar is unhealthy. The second source was a website that described sugar as part of a nutritious, balanced diet. Each source seemed to suggest a different answer.

Mark: Unfortunately, that's not uncommon. The internet is an open space, where anyone can post just about anything.

Tasha: During our club, we learned that it's up to the reader to determine what's a credible source, which means the source is accurate and has good intentions. I used the list you provided of questions to ask ourselves to help us determine credibility.

Mark: Great! The first question was, "Does the source answer your question?" How did you answer the question?

Tasha: The answer was yes; both sources provided an answer. But I'm glad we have additional questions, because just one wouldn't have helped.

Mark: Exactly, drilling down into the source helps us build a complete picture. The next question was, "Are the sources talking about the same thing and are they defining words the same way?"

Tasha: They both talked about sugar, but I had to search to figure out if they were talking about sugar in the same way. I went to an encyclopedia website and learned that sugar exists naturally in fruit and other types of food. But it can also be processed, where someone has changed something about the sugar. Once that change happens, it can be hard to say whether the change causes an issue or is a concern. The first article talked about processed sugar, but the second article just talked about sugar in general.

Mark: So, they may or may not discuss sugar in the same way. To know whether to consider both sources, you had to answer the third question, "What do you want to do with the information?"

Tasha: My goal was to learn whether sugar is nutritious and then share facts with the program community. That means I wanted to inform the audience.

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Mark: Great! All information can be sorted according to its primary purpose. Raw information without any editing is simply used to document events. In contrast, reporters for news media edit and analyze content to inform the public. Opinion pieces are used to persuade people to adopt a view, and information can also be used to provoke strong emotional reactions. Information is also commonly used for entertainment — for example in videos, shows, memes and comments. All over the web there's also information used for advertising, which generates a profit through sales. In the virtual environment, all these purposes interact and coexist. How did you decide your purpose was to inform?

Tasha: The project's goal was to make people aware of a topic. We learned that marketing agencies refer to this as building awareness. So, my purpose was to inform. I needed facts from websites that edited their content very little. Otherwise, I could accidentally use someone's opinions.

Mark: Did either of the sources provide facts and facts alone?

Tasha: To figure that out, I asked myself the fourth and fifth questions. The fourth question is "Who wrote it?" I found out that one was written by a scientific research organization and the other by a group of sugar farmers.

Mark: And, the fifth question is "Why did they write it?" What was your answer?

Tasha: Based on my understanding, the research organization wanted to inform the public about the research and the farmers want people to eat more sugar.

Mark: What makes you say that?

Tasha: Well, the research organization explained their research, describing the experiments and results. They also stated where they got the research. Our science teacher told us researchers share their experiments so that others can do them as well. When other people do the experiments and get the same results, everyone knows that the information is on its way to becoming a fact. The farmers' site included a lot of statements and testimonials, but I couldn't tell where the farmers got their information. The farmers' site might have been facts, or it might have been opinions; I couldn't tell for sure.

Mark: And with that, you answered the sixth, and final, question. "Does the author cite the sources or share where the information is from?" After answering the questions, what did you decide about whether to use the sites?

Tasha: I actually decided that I needed more sources because I couldn't answer question number two. I don't know if the farmers talked about natural or processed sugar. I needed to go back and find sources that clearly speak to one or the other. And, the farmers may still be sharing credible information, maybe they just have a bad page.

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Mark: The more sources you can find that speak to the same information, the more likely you are to have found a factual answer.

Tasha: I ended up finding 18 sources total and used seven of them when creating my project. At first it seemed like a lot, but the more sources I read, the faster I got at answering the six questions.

Mark: The more you do something, like evaluate a source, the faster your brain completes the task. Thanks for helping explain this process to our audience!

Tasha: Thanks for inviting me to this series on digital literacy!

Mark: Tasha used the six questions to evaluate a source, and her sources in this case were sites or articles. Here are the six questions:

1. Does the source answer your question?
2. When you use multiple sources, are they talking about the same thing and are they defining words the same way?
3. What do you want to do with the information?
4. Who wrote it?
5. Why was it written?
6. Does the author cite the sources or share where the information is from?

Tasha honed her evaluation skills in her 21st CCLC program. These skills helped her identify reliable information for her report and will help her throughout her life as she navigates the digital world. To apply these skills and approaches with your 21st CCLC students, check out the Step-By-Step Guide for Spotting Misinformation and Disinformation.

We hope you enjoyed this podcast, and we'll talk to you in podcast 3: Communicating With Your Audience. Thanks for making Y4Y your partner in learning.